



*Northeast Nebraska
Economic Development District*

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NENEDD SUMMARY TO THE NEBRASKA DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC INPUT MEETINGS ON FIVE YEAR CONSOLIDATED PLAN

June 4, 2004

Jennifer Bolen
Nebraska Department of Economic Development
PO Box 94666
Lincoln, NE 68509

RE: Report on Public Input Meetings

Dear Jennifer:

The Northeast Nebraska Economic Development District would like to thank the Nebraska Department of Economic Development for the opportunity to facilitate the public input meetings for the state's Five Year Consolidated Plan. We sincerely appreciate the Department's confidence in Nebraska economic development districts' abilities to garner public input. We will consciously strive to uphold your confidence and hope that you will find the enclosed report useful in preparation of the plan.

NENEDD advertised in all the newspapers in the region; ran PSA on area radio stations; mailed out a news release to area newspapers and made three separate mailings inviting citizens and organizations to the meetings and mailed out over 800 fliers to post in communities. This resulted in the attendance by 60 people at the four meetings and two written letters to be submitted.

I will happy to discuss the report in further detail or answer any questions.

Sincerely,

Renay Robison-Scheer
Executive Director

Enc.

Cc: Linda Fettig, NDED

The Housing Priority for DED is to increase housing production to ensure an adequate, appropriate and affordable housing supply to meet community economic development needs.

1. The State of Nebraska has a goal to increase cooperation among government entities, housing providers and lenders in order to produce more units of affordable housing. Are you and your clients better off now than you were last year relative to this goal?

- Representatives from communities and organizations felt they were better off now than they were five years ago but in the last year the reduction of funds for housing has hurt the communities and organizations substantially. There were many who expressed concern for the future of funding in light of the reduction in Trust Funds.
- A representative from Columbus felt that although they were better off now than five years ago because of NED, Inc., they felt their community didn't take advantage of the programs
- Fremont has utilized NIFA Tax Credits for various projects. (Sommers Point/Power House Apt.)

2. Has cooperation increased?

- Yes. Successful projects in specific communities have helped neighboring communities.
- There were many who expressed support of the housing application process (i.e., clarification/negotiation) and encouraged this methodology be implemented in other programs.

3. Has your community benefited economically from the improvements?

- Yes. Everyone felt that their communities benefited economically from the housing programs.

4. Where are the gaps in providing affordable housing in your community?

- Waiting lists on all programs are too long – need more money to reach more citizens
- Columbus expressed concern about needing an active housing organization
- Local contractors aren't building affordable housing (under \$90,000) because of the high cost of land acquisition in some communities.
- Some felt that the lack of affordable housing had hindered the communities' ability to recruit new industry.
- A lender expressed a need for a DPA/Rehab program because the homes being purchased by some low income families were in substandard condition
- Community representatives in Columbus, Norfolk and Fremont all expressed a need for rehabilitation of rental property.
- Representatives from Fremont said that there is a waiting list of 80 persons for elderly housing.
- Fremont needs affordable single family housing
- Use Trust Funds and HOME funds for organizations that serve regions – use CDBG for the projects that are only in one or two communities
- DED needs to prioritize regional applications
- There is a concern about the narrow margin between homebuyer incomes and what they can afford.
- Everyone said there was a need for additional Down Payment Assistance funds.
- State should create another revenue source to fund the closing of the regional centers and not rely so much on the Housing Trust Funds.
- State should not support “new” organizations or fund organizations that are not proving to be self sustaining.
- Nebraska has enough housing organizations and many are not accountable to the local governments they serve.
- The use of a homogenous application for pre-application was suggested for housing, similar to the CDBG/USDA process with the W/WW program.

NENEDD Analysis of Needs and Recommendations

There is still considerable unmet housing needs in the region. Though everyone understood that currently there was limited funds, most felt that as a state government it was important to fund housing programs and to create and/or “find” additional resources to do so. Regional organizations (districts, CHDOs) were most cost effective in delivering the programs and should get priority. There were no new programs suggested.

The Homeless Priority for DED is to provide a continuum of housing opportunities and supportive services for homeless persons, while reducing homelessness through educational outreach and prevention activities.

1. The State of Nebraska has a goal to provide a continuum of housing opportunities and supportive services for homeless persons plus increase educational outreach and prevention activities. Are you and your clients better off now than you were last year relative to this goal?

- Care Corp (Fremont - part of continuum of care) did feasibility study of Dodge, Washington and Saunders Counties. Clients are better off now - Clients are able to get better housing/rental
- Representatives from Norfolk and Columbus Rescue Mission agreed that their clients were better off now than 5 years ago

2. Has homelessness been reduced?

- Fremont area feels that homelessness has been reduced with assistance of state funds.
- Goldenrod Hills has seen an increase in homeless persons in last 5 years
- Norfolk Rescue Mission has seen a tremendous increase – feel that the increase is related to drug use

3. How?

- Most programs in the area are for “almost” homeless
- Finding the cause of homelessness-giving them skills/empowerment

4. Has the focus on the continuum of care improved assistance to the homeless?

- One community (Norfolk) wonders if these programs are really helping people. There is a perception that welfare pays for everything giving people more money to fund drug/alcohol problems.

5. Where are the gaps in providing successful homeless services?

- Funding gaps – there is a need for transitional housing that covers the gap between the emergency shelter and functionality.
- Goldenrod Hills and Care Corp, Fremont sees need for transitional housing in the area.
- Many expressed concern that the Section 8 housing funds have been cut.
- Additional funds are needed for travel expenses for caseworkers.
- Funding agencies need to be more accountable.
- Comments from the representative from the mission said that most homeless persons are alcohol and/or drug users and that the homeless programs need to make the recipients accountable by requiring drug testing and have no outstanding warrants for arrest to qualify for programs.
- Goldenrod Hills said that the lack of funding for comprehensive case management was lacking.
- The Norfolk Mission representative said the state needs to make sure that each resident released from a prison and/or mental care facility have a release plan in place to make sure they are getting drug rehabilitation services, mental health care, etc.

NENEDD Analysis of Needs and Recommendations

NENEDD mailed and faxed out invitations to the organizations on the list provided by HHS. Representatives of these programs attended the Norfolk and Fremont meetings. There was much discussion about the homelessness programs and their accountability at the Norfolk meeting. It was suggested that the end-user/recipient be required to pass some screening process such as drug test, etc. The representatives from Goldenrod Hills felt that their clients were being accountable and that their clients were mostly families that have come upon hard times for many reasons and not drug users etc. They felt that their clients would probably pass those types of screening processes and therefore did not think that would prohibit their clients from access but would just reduce the amount of money available to provide actual assistance. Recommendations to the program would be for the state to assist in the development of transitional housing program and to increase the amount of money for homelessness.

The Non-Housing Economic Development Priority for DED is to strengthen Nebraska communities by targeting serious community development problems capable of being resolved through economic development projects.

1. The State of Nebraska has a goal to strengthen Nebraska communities by targeting serious community development problems through economic development projects. Are you and your clients better off now than you were last year relative to this goal?

- All participants felt that they were better off now than one year and/five years ago.

2. Are you working to take advantage of this goal and how?

- The representatives at the meeting of communities that have utilized ED funds said the projects were creating jobs that exceed the ratio to funding.
- The Spec Building program is successful for cities of 1st class where they see a benefit in employment and active community development.
- Most community representatives present at the meeting said their community had not participated but not because they were not aware of the program. They wanted the program to be available in case they ever did need it.

3. How much of your client base can you reach with such projects?

- Few businesses in the region have benefited from the program

4. Are these projects helping the residents of your community acquire good jobs?

- All those that had utilized the program felt that citizens had acquired good jobs because of the program

5. Where are the gaps in providing successful economic development projects?

- Nebraska does not put enough resources in incentives to offer business and industry
- Communities using ED funds do not want the 60-day application cycle. They would rather see the open cycle as in the past.
- Larger communities felt that DED should examine the use of spec buildings in smaller communities. They didn't feel the smaller communities were as effective in utilization of the spec building program.

NENEDD Analysis of Needs and Recommendations

Once again there is a strong demand for incentives in the region, but not enough resources available locally to offer them. Comments from the larger communities focused on the need for state legislation to provide more incentives. It was felt that DED utilizes the CDBG program to its full potential in offering it as an incentive tool (especially through job training) but CDBG funds were not enough in the state arsenal to compete. Only recommendation to the program was to keep the open cycle – 60 day cycle not effective.

The CDBG Community Development Priority of DED is to strengthen Nebraska communities by targeting serious community development problems capable of being resolved through business development projects.

1. The State of Nebraska has a goal to strengthen Nebraska communities by targeting serious community development projects through infrastructure projects. Are you and your clients better off now than they were last year relative to this goal?

- All representatives knew of some community or even their own that had benefited from the Public Works or Water/Waste Water program

2. Are you working to take advantage of this goal and how?

- Representatives from Fremont and Columbus felt they had the tax base to meet their public works needs but also said that they needed the smaller communities around them to continue to benefit from the program because in turn that strengthens them.
- All community representatives said that they are working to take advantage of this goal

3. How much of your client base can you reach with infrastructure development projects?

- All agreed that through the types of infrastructure projects they have, that all of their citizens could be reached benefiting particularly the low income

4. Are these projects helping the residents in your community least able to pay for these infrastructure services?

- Absolutely. The water, sewer and other user fees are less and therefore the cost burden to low income is less.

5. Where are the gaps in providing successful public works projects?

- Several communities want to see downtown improvement/revitalization programs that will benefit small businesses. Some felt that if funds were used for down town revitalization, there should also be a requirement of a Main Street program affiliation.
- Some felt that the CDBG portion should not exceed 25% of the costs of a project.
- Several clerks expressed disappointment that in order to utilize the program that the water and sewer rates were exorbitant

NENEDD Analysis of Needs and Recommendations

NENEDD staff conducted research prior to the Public Input Meetings to determine what programs were available in other states that were not available in Nebraska. These programs were included in the PowerPoint presentation as “Ideas for Change” to serve as examples. Several of the ideas were rejected such as use of funds for technology, alternative energy program. However, the one that received the most comment as being needed was the Downtown Revitalization program. The representatives of the smaller communities expressed a desire to find resources to assist in improving the appearance of their main streets.

The other most frequent suggestion was that DED coordinate with districts in determining what public works projects have priority. For example compare the projects to the priorities of the region making sure they were consistent with the priorities of the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy that is prepared by each district. Another suggestion by the Northeast Nebraska Economic Development District was to let the district representative rank the projects submitted within its region. The state would still compare it on a statewide basis.

Another recommendation was to streamline the application process by using the same forms as USDA and/or Department of Environmental Quality to make the water/waste water program easier to use.

The CDBG Business Development Priority for DED is to strengthen Nebraska communities by targeting serious community development problems capable of being resolved through business development projects.

1. The State of Nebraska has a goal to strengthen targeted communities with business development projects by providing small business development or job training. Are you and your clients better off now than they were last year relative to this goal?

- Representatives from Fremont and Columbus indicated they had benefited.
- Most expressed support for this program even though they may not have utilized it. Want it available in case they do need it.

2. Are you working to take advantage of this goal and how?

- In Columbus, there have been companies that got started with assistance of job training funds in collaboration with Central Community College.
- Fremont, Norfolk, Wayne representatives all said they try to take advantage of this program.

3. How much of your client base can you reach with small business development and job training?

- Most representatives said their weren't enough funds available in the programs to reach enough of their clients/businesses

4. Are these projects helping the residents of your community least able to pay for these business development services?

- Most were not aware that there were programs utilizing these services
- When explaining that REAP and NENEDD small business programs were funded in part by some of these funds, they all agreed that this helped the low income citizens

5. Where are the gaps in providing successful small business development projects and job training?

- Fremont/Dodge County residents felt they would benefit from more of these funds going to programs like NENEDD so they could have better access to its programs
- Communities felt that the NENEDD and Nebraska Business Development Center (NBDC) resources are spread too thin. Cost of providing the needed T/A is tremendous and there is a gap to providing the T/A needed in northeast Nebraska.
- Fremont is implementing plans for a business incubator, but unfortunately CDBG funds won't be utilized, as DED does not consider business incubators a priority.
- Department of Labor job training program is less complicated. Could they switch some of these funds to CDBG?

NENEDD Analysis of Needs and Recommendations

There is a far bigger demand for technical assistance by small businesses than there are organizations or staff to provide it. The Nebraska Department of Economic Development must play a bigger role in sustaining and/or expanding the programs that provide that service. There is a greater demand for Capacity Building related to this program than there is for housing development. Job Training funds are the best incentive that is being offered directly. The job training program is an important segment of the recruitment arsenal.

The CDBG Planning Priority for DED is to strengthen Nebraska communities by targeting serious community development problems capable of being resolved through planning projects that give communities the opportunity to solve those problems at a local level.

1. The State of Nebraska has a goal to target serious community development problems by providing communities funds to solve the problems locally through the planning process. Are you and your clients better off now than you were last year relative to this goal?

- Every community felt they have benefited from DED's Planning Program. They have completed studies involving comprehensive planning, housing studies, water/wastewater studies, and various other projects.
- The representatives from the CHDO's all stated they and their clients were much better off.

2. Are you working to take advantage of this situation and how?

- Columbus and Fremont representatives stated they could "pay their own way" when funding the small studies and that planning funds should go to smaller communities and to NENEDD to help small communities do strategic planning.
- All other representatives at the four meetings said they looked to this program and take advantage of it.

3. How much of your client base can you reach with planning funds?

- All of the community benefits.

4. Where are the gaps in providing successful planning projects?

- There should be a process that would certify communities that have gone through the planning process including the formation of a project team ready for prospect visits.
- All community representatives (clerks, mayors, city council and village board members) felt DED could best utilize Development Districts as a mechanism to deliver DED programs.
- Many felt that Development Districts should be consulted to ascertain project readiness
- The CHDO representatives present at the meetings said that the 3 years may not be enough time for capacity building grants. Need to make it a case-by-case basis.
- Other program representatives said three years should be long enough to determine sustainability.
- Increase the amount of capacity funds so that new programs could access funds if DED is going to keep funding existing programs over and over

NENEDD Analysis of Needs and Recommendations

There were strong feelings by some representatives in Fremont that DED should not be funding communities that were not taking the necessary steps to further development. That maybe DED should create a certification program that only those that have gone through the program would be eligible for funding.

The Community Development System Priority of DED is to increase the effectiveness of State community development programs and services through streamlining and collaborative approaches focusing on customer need.

1. What are your organization's priorities for next year?

- Most of the clerk's described infrastructure projects
- Norfolk, Fremont and Columbus indicted housing and job creation
- Other community / organization representatives said housing was a priority

2. How would you describe your working relationship with DED?

- All representatives described their relationships with DED as good or very good.
- Most felt that DED has been very responsive to their needs and requests.

3. Where is there room for improvement in your relationship with DED?

- Every community would like to see some way to streamline the bureaucratic process.
- Representatives from Fremont and Norfolk felt that there was not a loan packager in their area and encourage cooperation with NENEDD loan specialist more.
- Housing Field staff not good at returning calls in a timely manner
- Several comments at each of the public input meeting reflected a need to match the program dollar amounts awarded to the population i.e. larger communities get larger award. Concern that currently the small communities qualify for same amount as large communities; particular concern over housing rehabilitation program.
- That comment resulted in another that if programs were based on matching funds, rich communities would get richer; poor communities would get poorer. Therefore smaller communities need more money than larger ones.
- Comments in Columbus and Norfolk reflected concerns over the Regional Center closing. They expressed the need for transition housing/rental assistance for individuals removed from the centers.
- All communities are pleased that input collection was done before the Five Year Consolidated Plan and the Annual Action Plan was prepared and would like to see DED continue this.

NENEDD Analysis of Needs and Recommendations

Almost all the participants (written and at meetings) felt that DED staff was easy to work with and very responsive. There were many suggestions on modification to the existing application process and the delivery of the programs.

- Discussion included suggestions to DED to provide set-aside funds for Development Districts to deliver services similar to the affordable housing funds for the Northeast Investment Zone now.
- It was also suggested that Development District review and rank CDBG applications for funding.
- A single application for USDA, EDA, CDBG, etc. might streamline the process reducing paperwork for communities as well.
- One suggestion would be to have DED contract out for financial packaging service with NENEDD or someone else.
- Every community felt some form of pre-application or letter of intent should be used for all programs. This would allow only those communities that are truly prepared to undertake their project to proceed with a complete application.
- Throughout the pre-application process, communities felt that DED staff should visit and review the project if necessary to understand the project.